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Was the world's largest snake measured by a French missionary? A critical analysis of a giant *Simalia amethistina* (Schneider, 1801) reported in Papua New Guinea

Ivan Ineich[1], Nils Robin[2] and Mark O'Shea[3,4]

[1]Institut de Systématique, Évolution, Biodiversité (ISYEB), Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, CNRS, Sorbonne Université, École Pratique des Hautes Études-PSL, Université des Antilles, CP 38, 57 rue Cuvier, 75005 Paris, France, ivan.ineich@mnhn.fr
[2]12 Place Saint Sulpice, 75006 Paris, France
[3]Faculty of Science and Engineering, University of Wolverhampton, Wulfruna Street, Wolverhampton WV1 1LY, United Kingdom, m.oshea@wlv.ac.uk
[4]Herpetology, Natural History Museum, Cromwell Road, London SW7 5BD, United Kingdom

Introduction

The literature is replete with references to giant snakes of modern (non-fossil) origin, but critical analysis generally leads to questioning the sizes reported. Evidence to support these reports is usually weak. Here we analyze a report of a giant snake measured in Papua New Guinea (PNG) by a French missionary in the mid-20th century and discuss its relevance.

Father André[1] Pierre Eugène Dupeyrat was born on March 8, 1902, in Cherbourg, Normandy (France, Cotentin department) and died on December 29, 1982, in Marseille (Bouches-du-Rhône department). He spent most of his life as a missionary with the Congregation of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Issoudun (Indre department). In this context, he spent about twenty years with the Fuyughe tribe in the Goilala District in the Central Province of Papua New Guinea, starting in October 1929, just one year after his ordination (Fig. 1). He made two long stays on the island, 1929–1935 then 1936–1950, before returning permanently to France in 1950 (Dupeyrat, 1935). From 1951 onwards, he gave numerous lectures in the Manche department (France), as well as elsewhere in France and around the world (e.g., Australia, USA, Canada, New Caledonia). Often referred to as an explorer-speaker, he was a member of the French *Société des explorateurs* and the *Société des Océanistes*. He regularly published in the *Journal de la Société des Océanistes* and contributed several book reviews to that journal. He was the author of ten works (1930 to 1964) relating to his two stays in Papua New Guinea and the history of missionaries in Oceania. Several of his books were translated into other languages (Dupeyrat, 1954a, b, 1955, 1963). He was awarded several literary prizes, including the Juteau-Duvigneaux Prize

Fig. 1. Father André Dupeyrat in Papua New Guinea. No photographer and no date. Photograph extracted from Dupeyrat (1954a: 16), first published in the French original edition, *Vingt et un ans chez les papous* (Dupeyrat, 1952).

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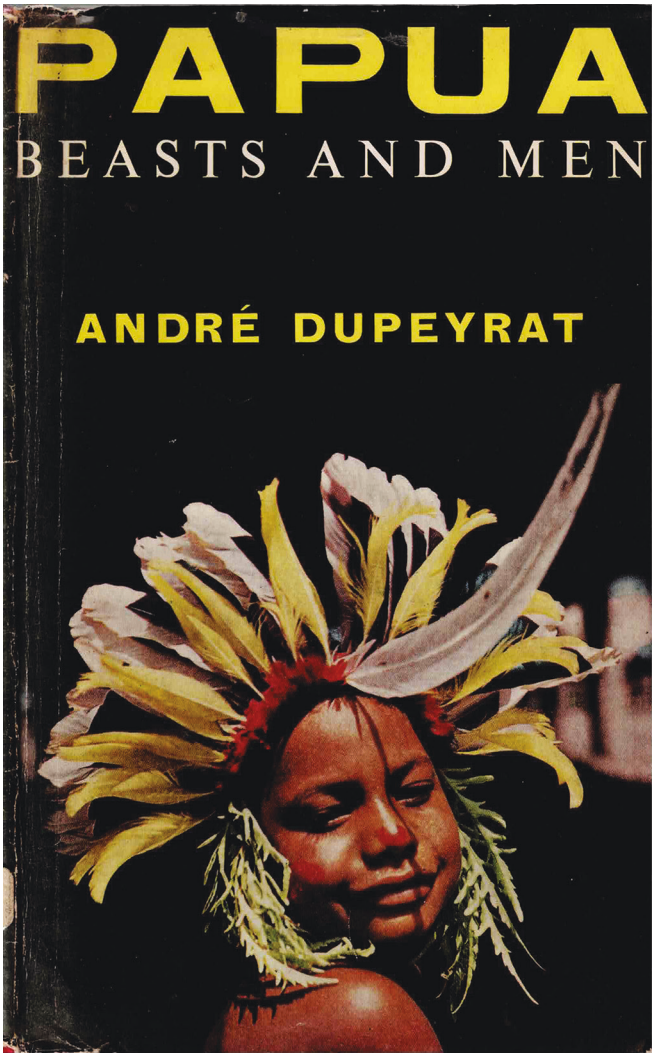

Fig. 2. Front cover of the 1963 English edition of Dupeyrat's 1962 original French edition, "La Bête et le Papou".

awarded by the *Académie française* in 1953. Videos of his interviews are available online, for example on the website of the *Institut national de l'audiovisuel* (INA) (e.g., https://www.ina.fr/ina-eclaire-actu/video/i16281278/le-souvenir-des-morts-chez-les-papous; https://mediaclip.ina.fr/fr/i21113187-le-cannibalisme-chez-les-papous.html). His actions and impact are often analyzed in the literature (e.g. Barrault, 1963; Marx, 2007). André Dupeyrat is considered a pioneer of Melanesian ethnological knowledge.

The giant python of Dupeyrat

In his 1962 work, "La Bête et le Papou"[2] (Fig. 2), Dupeyrat documents in detail his observations following the capture of a very large snake (presumed a python). Alain Huetz de Lemps (1962, p. 339), the famous French geographer, botanist and economist, analysed this work in the journal *Cahiers d'outre-mer*:

> *"Father Dupeyrat was particularly interested in studying the relationships between the Papuans and the wildlife that surrounded them".*

During his stay in Papua New Guinea, Dupeyrat was responsible for creating a new evangelization center located between the two villages of Baula and Avole ("Avélé" on the map in the French 1962 edition), approximately 15–20 km south of Fane (8.5583°S, 147.0100°E), and six days' walk from the Mission (Fig. 3). To build the huts for this center, the father intends to exploit a grove of "barou", a palm tree (*Rhopalostylis* sp.) with a robust trunk, from which planks can be made that are "*a little too flexible but indestructible*" because they are termite-proof. However, the villagers, evoking a "*terrible and powerful Spirit*" that haunts the grove, refuse to enter. The father, armed with an axe, therefore advances alone in the thick undergrowth at the foot of the palm trees. He discovers a wide passage that becomes a tunnel in which, on all fours, he ends up facing an enormous python. Panicked, he beats a hasty retreat. Knowing the fears and superstitions of the Papuans, Dupeyrat did not want to shoot this snake with his rifle, preferring to let the Papuans capture the reptile using their own methods. They accept, their hunting instinct aroused for a choice game, thus overcoming their superstitious fears. He cites the local legend of the Spirit incarnate in the Python *outame* [= sacred] (p. 185, 1962 French edition). Surrounded by a troop of more than a hundred people, Dupeyrat entrusted the capture of the giant snake to the Papuans at 11 a.m. A small pig was tied to a stake after hesitating with a dog. An ingenious noose system placed under tension by a system of folded branches was to be used to capture and lift the snake as soon as it had seized the prey that served as bait. It should be noted that this place is considered taboo by the natives. It was not until the third day, early in the morning, that the snake was caught. The noose had captured it less than three meters behind the head before it could seize the piglet, which was then devoured by the watchmen on duty around the trap during the night. In the French edition here translated, Dupeyrat (p. 193) states:

> *"I estimated that it was over ten meters long. I was slightly mistaken".*

He then mentions a local legend and considers that it could be inspired by the sight of this same snake which he considers to be very old. This local legend, *Didi Manou*, says that the *Tsidibe Didive* placed the head of this python *outame* in the great forest between Gaïva and Baula. Astonished by the rage with which the natives threw branches, clods of earth and stones at the snake, while insulting it, Dupeyrat asked an elder who was not taking part in the spectacle:

> *"Wasn't this Manou (= python) a Manouv'outame? So why do people treat him like this?"*

The old man replied:

> *"We thought he was outame, but now we know he is not since he let himself be caught. It's just a Manou gata" (= less than anything python)"*[3].

The capture of the snake quickly attracted curious onlookers, including those from Kodighe (Fig. 3), a village three hours' walk upstream, and even from Gaïva, on the other side of the mountain. After its death, the python was hoisted onto 20 shoulders and ordinary poles were placed transversally under the main pole and 20 other shoulders supported them. On page 198 of his French book, Dupeyrat states:

> *"It has been calculated that an anaconda — this aquatic boa from tropical America — eight meters long weighs at least half a ton. The weight of our python must therefore have been six to seven hundred kilos. Ten men could have carried it easily*[4]*, but there were more than forty huddled around the load, getting in each other's way and jostling each other".*

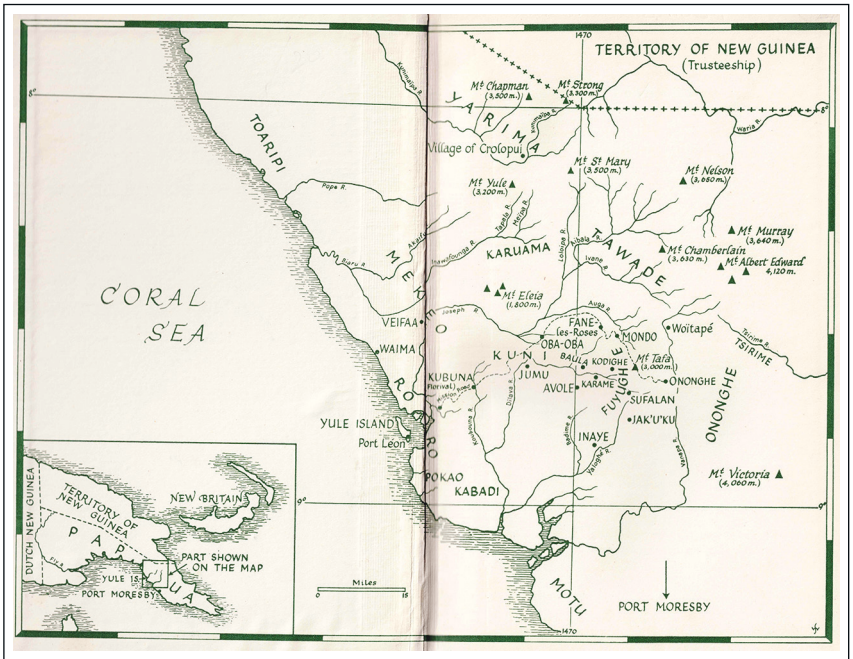

Fig. 3. Map extracted from Dupeyrat (1954a) showing the area of Baula and Avole where the giant snake was captured. Note that locality names used on that map and those of the map provided in the 1962 French original edition are not spelled in the same way. Also the selection of indicated localities is not the same on both maps.

The rapid circulation of information had spread to all the villages in the valley that they will be entitled to a piece of the python, according to the custom of sharing slaughtered pigs.

Dupeyrat provides some information on the snake's colouration. On page 199 in the French edition (there translated), he reports that:

> *"Slow, long shivers made the magnificent skin ripple with its fine scales tinted coppery yellow, but which were arranged here and there in beautiful, large geometric patterns mixing black, green and brown*[5]*".*

A little further on (p. 200), he describes the animal's eye:

> *"wide open, enormous like those of a dead man, not brilliant yellow – that is not saying enough – but the colour of molten copper whose brilliance is intolerable: in the middle, the lens-like pupil was an even more dazzling dark green and black".*

Immediately after this description, Dupeyrat indicated that he was for a moment totally hypnotized and paralyzed by the eyes of the animal, undoubtedly influenced by the negative biblical image of the serpent instilled during his religious education. Later, he himself cut off the head of the "fascinator python", as if the python has him under its spell.

The snake was not measured by Dupeyrat himself but by a Canadian brother present at the scene. The Canadian brother was assigned to him by the Superior of the Mission during the construction. This brother was skilled in carpentry, joinery and construction. We can therefore assume that the size of the python was measured with care and concern for precision, as Father Dupeyrat also emphasized:

> *"thirty-one feet and five inches, or ten meters forty-five centimeters*[6]*",*

specifying:

> *"Head included: that nothing was lost, it had been placed in its normal place".*

The measured (largest?) body circumference was seventy-eight centimeters. The animal was then cut into pieces for sharing. Dupeyrat (1962, French edition, p. 202 there translated) then said to the Papuans:

> *"I'll give you my share of the meat ... But what I want is the whole skin. That will be my share".*

He was certainly aware of the interest of his observation and the need to bring back the skin to prove it. Unfortunately, later he reports (p. 203, translated from the 1962 French edition):

"What was my indignant astonishment to find that the python had been cut up with its skin… they had understood that I was asking for the entire body of the python, which could indeed pass for a ridiculous joke".

He does not mention in the book that a photograph of that snake was taken but such a picture is provided (see below). There is therefore no material evidence of this capture of a giant snake in Papua New Guinea. Dupeyrat when mentioning the local legend of *Didi Manou* (see above) attributed the tale to the same snake he captured. However, legends are ancient and often imagined so this is unlikely.

Our attempt to identify Dupeyrat's giant python

In total ten species of pythons (Pythonidae) are present on mainland New Guinea: *Antaresia papuensis* Esquerré, Donnellan, Pavón-Vázquez, Fenker & Keogh, 2021; *Apodora papuana* (Peters & Doria, 1878); *Leiopython albertisii* (Peters & Doria, 1878); *L. fredparkeri* Schleip, 2008; *Liasis fuscus* Peters, 1873; *Morelia azurea* (Meyer, 1874); *M. spilota* (Lacepède, 1804); *M. viridis* (Schlegel, 1872); *Simalia amethistina* (Schneider, 1801); and *S. boeleni* (Brongersma, 1953). An eleventh species, *Simalia kinghorni* (Stull, 1933), whose specific status is now established (formerly regarded as *S. amethistina kinghorni*) even if its range ends are not defined (see below), could also occur in southern New Guinea adjacent to the Torres Strait islands.

In accordance with the body size, colouration and the photograph provided by Dupeyrat, only two snake species might be considered and only one is unambiguously reported from New Guinea:

Simalia amethistina is a common snake throughout most of New Guinea and neighbouring archipelagos, and specimens may actually have copper-coloured eyes like those described by Dupeyrat. Parker (1982) reports maximum lengths between 5.5–6.0 m (see later) while Macleay (1877) reports a specimen that "*measured 14 feet [4.26 m] in length, and was of great thickness*". This individual was collected from Hall Sound which lies between Yule Island and mainland New Guinea, the Mekeo region where Dupeyrat was based. One of us (MOS) has spent much time in PNG and seen numerous *S. amethistina*, but the largest were a 4.27 m specimen captured in the Bensbach River, Western Province, and a 4.57 m specimen photographed in captivity at Dami in West New Britain Province in the Bismarck Archipelago;

Simalia kinghorni is an Australian species which achieves a length of 8.5 m and which inhabits the northeast coast of Queensland. Authorities differ as to whether this species also occurs in southern New Guinea and the Torres Strait islands (Lavery et al., 2012; Eipper & Eipper, 2024; Wilson & Swan, 2025)[7]. However, a statement from the former *kiap*[8] and herpetologist Fred Parker might add credibility to the presence of larger *S. kinghorni* in the Trans-Fly region. He writes:

"The largest I saw in Western Province [PNG] was between 5.5 and 6 m long and was quite a handful – it was released again" (Parker, 1982:24).

Regardless of whether *S. kinghorni* occurs in southern New Guinea, any such population would likely inhabit the seasonally flooded Southern Trans-Fly of Western Province, PNG, and the neighbouring Merauke District, South Papua Province of Indonesian Western New Guinea, rather than the Mekeo region where Dupeyrat lived and worked, on the Papuan Peninsula, across the Gulf of Papua in what is now Central Province, PNG.

The identification of Dupeyrat's giant snake does not seem possible from the overly brief description he provided. Anyway Dupeyrat also wanted to bring the snake's skin with him to prove the observation and the indicated measurements. The presence of very large snakes in New Guinea is beyond doubt, several individual over 4.50 m are known to date (see later). De Hontheim (2016) cites Father Dupeyrat's python and specifies [translated from French]:

"A symbol of war, the snake was also used to establish peace between two communities, one of which refused to go to war. Thus, the assailants, sure of their imminent defeat, exhibited it to renounce combat; each side would stand at one end of the reptile and pull to seal the peace. For the main strategists ("war leaders"), displaying the skin on their biceps or waist was enough to declare their refusal to fight. The snake in question here is muniw, a large python accused of swallowing dogs and children and causing roofs to collapse; it is still kept alive in houses today for its teeth, which are said to have occult virtues. My informants assure that some specimens can reach twenty meters" [text in footnote 29 which refers to the book by Dupeyrat (1962)].

Father Dupeyrat's observation remains enigmatic, but it seems that his size indication of more than 10 meters (10.20 or 9.57 m according to our feet/inch conversion) might not be credible. The Hungarian zoologist Lajos Biró (1856–1931) collected widely in New Guinea during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He obtained the large dried skin of a python which was described as *Liasis maximus* by the Austrian zoologist Franz Werner (1867–1939), with the type locality given only as "Nova Guinea" (Werner, 1936). The skin, which was deposited in the Magyar Természettudományi Múzeum (Hungarian Natural History Museum, Budapest), reputedly measured 4.3 m, but it was lost, along with Biró's entire collection during the Hungarian Museum fire which followed the Russian invasion to suppress the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 (Judit Vörös, pers. comm., 22 November 2018; see also Matskási (2002); Tyler et al. (2023)).

Werner had earlier described *Liasis tornieri* (Werner, 1897), based on two specimens purchased from the Antwerp-

based natural history dealer Georg Redemann (fl. 1895) (Werner, 1897). The type locality was cited as Stephensort, near Bogadjim, Deutsch-Neuguinea, which is now Madang town, Madang Province, PNG. One specimen was accessioned into the Naturhistorisches Museum Wien (Vienna Natural History Museum) as NMW 15078 (Silke Schweiger, pers. comm., 12 January 2024), but the other was retained by Werner in his private collection and is now deemed lost.

Both *Liasis maximus* and *L. tornieri* are believed to be synonyms of *Apodora papuana*, a stout-bodied python that can be compared with the more slimline *S. amethistina* just as *Python bivittatus* might be compared with a *Malayopython reticulatus* of the same length. Indeed, *A. papuana* has been known to prey upon similar-sized *S. amethistina* (O'Shea, 1988).

However, a photograph reportedly of the python killed in this incident is provided in the French (Dupeyrat, 1962) and English language editions (Dupeyrat, 1963, facing p. 129), and three things are obvious. Firstly, the photograph was taken post-mortem but before decapitation. Secondly, the species can be identified as *S. amethistina* (or *S. kinghorni*) according to both the picture and the geographic origin of the snake, and thirdly, it is of nowhere near the size claimed by Dupeyrat. We have not established the gender of the python. In most python and boa species the female is the much larger sex but curiously in *Simalia amethistina* it is the male that is much larger than the female (MOS pers. obs.), and the same has been reported for *S. kinghorni* (Fearn et al., 2005) and probably holds true for other members of the *S. amethistina* complex, e.g., *S. clastolepis*. Snake bodies and eyes grow at different rates, the latter more slowly than the former, so that eyes appear large on juveniles, but much smaller of very large specimens. Having observed numerous pythons and anacondas including individuals between 6.7–7.0 m in total length, the last author has become able to estimate approximate total size from the ratio of eye to head. Figure 4 shows the photograph from Dupeyrat (A) compared to an individual of *S. amethistina* (B) captured by the last author at Wereave on the Bensbach River, Western Province, PNG in 2000, a captive individual of *S. amethistina* (C) photographed by the same author at Dami, West New Britain Province, PNG in 2008, and two individuals of *S. kinghorni* (C–D), a related species from Queensland (Fearn & Sambono, 2000). It is difficult to obtain reliable meristic data from photographs of dead specimens, especially those with distorted heads or partially opened mouths, but it is clear that the eye of the Dupeyrat specimen is larger, in relation to the head, that that of the Dami or Wereave individuals, but smaller than those of the two Queensland pythons.

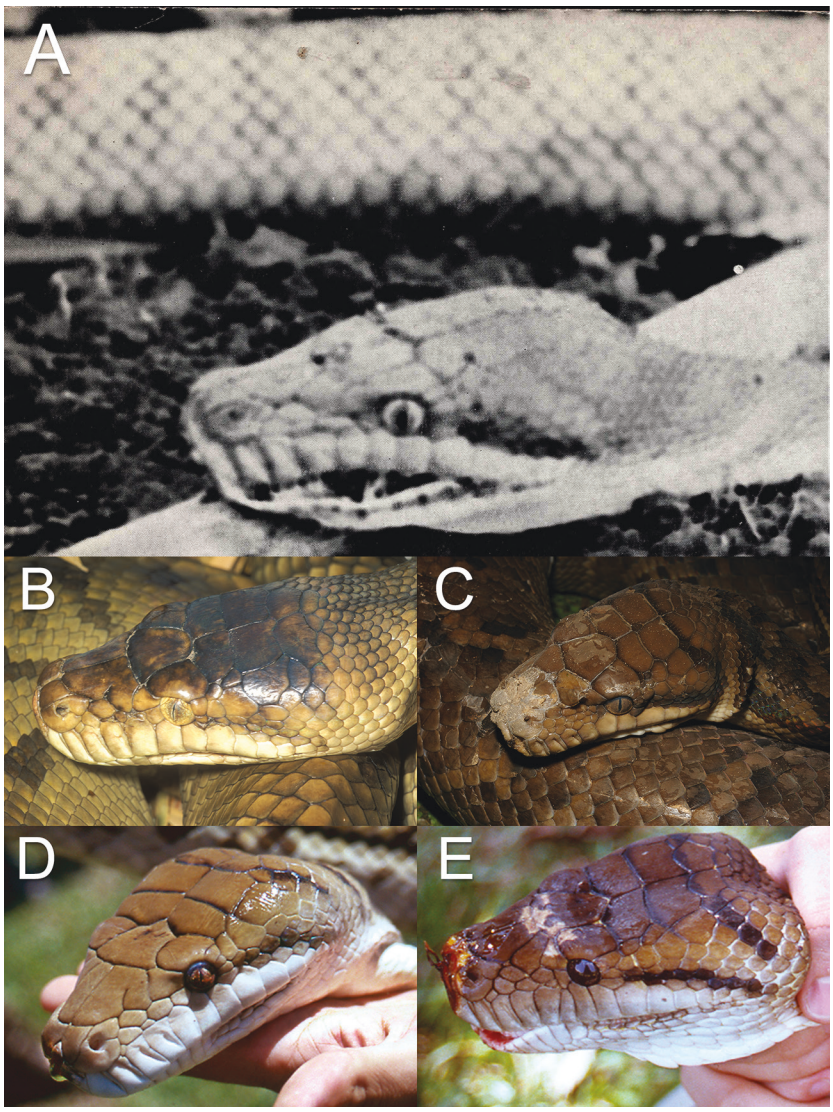

Fig. 4. Eye diameter. (A) Photograph from Dupeyrat (1962, 1963) compared to a 4.27 m *S. amethistina* (B) captured by MOS at Wereave on the Bensbach River, Western Province, PNG in 2000; a 4.57 m captive individual of *S. amethistina* (C) photographed by MOS at Dami, West New Britain Province, PNG in 2008; a 5.6 m female *S. kinghorni* (D) captured at Palm Cove, Cairns, Qld (Fearn & Sambono, 2000, picture reproduced with permission); and a 5.3+ m male *S. kinghorni* (E) from Karunda, Qld (Fearn, 2002, picture reproduced with permission).

The Wereave python was measured in the field at 4.27 m, and the Dami python was 4.57 m, while the Karunda (Queensland) python was 5.33 m and the Palm Cove (Queensland) python was 5.65 m, which means the Dupeyrat python was probably no larger than 5.0–5.4 m in total length.

We also can make some comments on the way the snake was caught. We are somewhat dubious of Dupeyrat's account of the capture. Komodo dragons can be baited with a tethered goat, but pythons cannot be expected to respond in the same

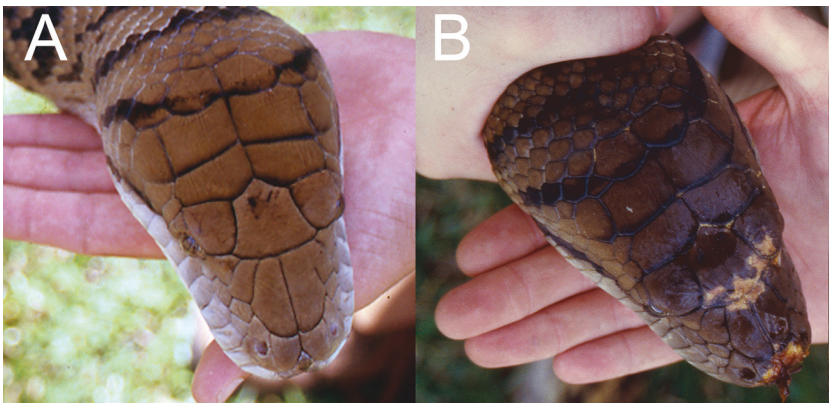

Fig. 5. Head photographs from large Queensland *S. kinghorni*. (A) a 5.651 m female from Palm Cove, Cairns (picture from Fearn & Sambono, 2000); (B) a 5.325+ m male from Karunda (see Table I) (picture from Fearn, 2002), the same individuals pictured in Figure 4, reproduced with permission of the first author.

Table 1. Measurements and weights for two large *S. kinghorni* from Karunda and Cairns (Fearn & Sambono, 2000; Fearn, 2002). SVL = snout-to vent length; TL = tail length; TTL = total length; + = a truncated tail; GMB = girth at midbody; HL = head length from tip of snout to rear of jaws; HW(e) = head width between the eyes; HW(b) = head width at back of skull; HD = head depth from top of head to under the throat; WT = weight in kg.

	Fearn & Sambono, 2000	Fearn, 2002
Location	Cairns	Karunda
Sex	female	male
SVL mm	4900	4730
TL mm	751	595+
TTL mm	5651	5325+
GMB mm	360	n/a
HL mm	120	113
HW(e) mm	45	47
HW(b) mm	70	86
HD mm	44	48
WT kg	24	19

way, it might be months rather than days before a large snake would bother to investigate a tethered prey animal, if ever! *Simalia amethistina* is often highly arboreal, hunting in fruit bat rookeries in mangrove swamps, something that would be impossible for a heavier bodied snake.

Dupeyrat's attempts to justify python weights are based on comparisons with South American anacondas of similar lengths, but anacondas are aquatic boas capable of achieving more considerable girths and weights than terrestrial pythons, their bodies being supported by water, so the two are not comparable. Dupeyrat's weight estimation is purely mathematical, 8 m equates to 500 kg[9], and 10 m equates to 625 kg, and confirms that he believed the python measured around 10 m! Very "fat" anacondas seen with coils floating in the water's surface are often in that condition because they have fed and they are full of digestive gases that inflate their bodies like balloons that then become buoyant, so circumference is rarely a good clue to length. The girth Dupeyrat provides was 78 cm which is almost 31 inches and very large, much larger than is recorded for *S. amethistina*. That is large even for a fully grown female anaconda (*Eunectes murinus*) and we are dubious.

Note also that the python pictured is visibly nowhere near the quoted girth in Dupeyrat. Our assumption is that the python in the photograph is the python in Dupeyrat's story, the one killed and eaten by the villagers, purportedly the one in the photograph in the English 1963 edition as confirmed by the caption "Head of the python with the diabolical eyes" and therefore that photograph alone confirms that the python cannot be as large as Dupeyrat claims in his story. If the photograph is of a substitute python it also raises questions about honesty.

Discussion

A set of measurements and weights exist for a male and a female Australian *S. kinghorni* (Fig. 5; Tab. I), which are reputed to grow larger than New Guinea *S. amethistina* (Fearn & Sambono, 2000; Fearn, 2002).

The measurements above for two recently documented *S. kinghorni* from north-east Queensland would place it in the same size-range as the Dupeyrat python and larger than the Wereave and Dami individuals. However, the girth of 360 mm obtained for the female is less than half the circumference claimed by Dupeyrat for his python. The weights are particularly interesting because the 5.3 m male weighed in at 19 kg while the 5.6 m female weighed 24 kg. These are less than 5% of the massive weight (600–700 kg) provided by Dupeyrat for his python of similar length. No bibliographic reference is indicated by Dupeyrat for the anaconda size/weight that he used to extrapolate for his python weight. He certainly does not seem to be aware that anacondas can be bulky and heavy because they are aquatic with the water supporting their weight, but pythons are more terrestrial, and their weights may be more constrained. Ditmars (1931) mentions that a 4.5 m green anaconda was as heavy-bodied as a 7.4 m reticulated python. Mole (1914) measured a 5.0 m anaconda that weighed 105.5 kg. Anacondas in French Guiana of around 5 m total length have a weigh range of 75–100 kg. Rivas (2020) indicated a mean weight of 30.82 kg for a mean total length of 3.65 m for females. Pope (1955) reported a 5.8 m green anaconda with 0.9 m body circumference and 107 kg. Even if very precise measurements are indicated by Dupeyrat in his book (Dupeyrat 1962, 1963), a critical analysis of his report highlights several inconsistencies, and the absence of a voucher does not allow any verification of the reported size.

The snake Dupeyrat reported was certainly a large specimen of *Simalia amethistina*, which is not a heavy bodied snake (Figs 6–7), but its size is unlikely to exceed 6 m, which is certainly a record length for the species but far from being the largest snake in the world.

Fig. 6. One of the authors (MOS) with a large (2.0 m+) roadkilled *Simalia amethistina* showing its slender body. West New Britain Province, PNG, 2008.

Fig. 7. A large (c. 3 m) roadkilled *Simalia amethistina* from Brown River Road (Central Province, Papua New Guinea), the area where Dupeyrat lived and worked. Note the typical patterning for specimens from that area and the slender physique of relatively large specimens (photo MOS).

Acknowledgments

Authors wish to thank Simon Fearn for providing very helpful data and photographs for this paper.

Notes

1. The underlined name is Dupeyrat's usual name.
2. The English language edition was published as "*Papua Beasts and Men"*, in 1963.
3. Note from authors: The tok pisin (pidgin English) phrase is "samting nating" something nothing, it is dismissive.
4. This means 60–70 kg for each according to his weight estimation, which is very heavy. Why Dupeyrat said "easily"? This is probably because the snake weighed considerably less than 600-700 kg.
5. This description could be a reference to the iridescence of some pythons like *Simalia amethistina,* the likely etymological root of the "*amethistina*" is the amethyst iridescence of this species' scales in sunlight.
6. It was in 1959 that English-speaking countries adopted the new value of the foot (30.48 cm) and the inch (2.54 cm). It seems that the missionaries, due to their isolation, did not yet adopt this new value. Thus, before 1959 (one foot = 32.48 cm, one inch = 2.71 cm), the size of the snake, 31 feet and 5 inches, corresponds to 10.20 m while after 1959 it is 9.57 m. The value of 10.20 m that we calculate corresponds to that indicated by Dupeyrat as 10.45 m, therefore before taking into account the changes linked to the international agreement of 1959. This is quite logical because his last stay dates back to 1950 and he probably took the values from his field notes when later writing his book.
7. The division between *Simalia amethistina* and *S. kinghorni* is not clearly determined and is the source of some disagreement. In their recent book on Australian snakes, Eipper and Eipper (2024) reported that *S. kinghorni* occurs "*between Coen to the Conway Range*" on the northeast coast of Queensland, but also report that the identity of specimens between Coen and Yarraden, 108 km to the SSE of Coen, cannot be determined from their morphology, but they then state that specimens found "*from Yarraden north*" and across the Torres Strait into New Guinea, belong to *S. amethistina*. This conflicts with the even more recent 7th edition of Wilson & Swan (2025) which considers the range of *S. kinghorni* to include an isolated population at Airlie Beach, near the Conway Range, and all populations from Townsville north, through the Far North Queensland and the Torres Strait, into southern New Guinea. However several senior names regarded as synonyms of *S. amethistina* have to be reexamined and could be applied to Northern Cape, Torres Strait and New Guinean

populations referred to *S. kinghorni* (eg. *Liasis clarki* Barbour, 1914; *Hypaspistes dipsadides* Ogilby, 1891). Additional work is necessary to clarify names to apply to *Simalia* populations in the area but this is out of the scope of our paper.

8. A *kiap* was a pre-Independence Government patrol officer, usually an Australian, and that *tok pisin* name is derived from the German word "*Kapitan"*.
9. Dupeyrat said « half a ton », one ton is 1000 kg in France.

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We suggest the following format for citing this article:
Ineich, I., N. Robin, and M. O'Shea. 2026. Was the world's largest snake measured by a French missionary? A critical analysis of a giant *Simalia amethistina* (Schneider, 1801) reported in Papua New Guinea. *Bibliotheca Herpetologica* 20(5):53–60.